Congestive Heart Failure (CHF)

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What is congestive heart failure (CHF)?

- **Congestive heart failure (CHF)** occurs when the heart must work harder to pump blood throughout the body. CHF does not mean the heart is going to suddenly fail or stop working. When the heart can't pump blood to the kidneys, they cannot filter extra fluids out of the body and into the urine (pee). This fluid can build up in the lungs and the rest of the body, causing difficult breathing and swelling.

- Children born with certain types of heart problems are at risk for developing CHF. Not all children with heart defects will have CHF.

- CHF happens slowly over time. If your child has CHF, you will notice some signs and symptoms that start to develop over a period of time. The type and number of symptoms are different for each child.

What are symptoms of congestive heart failure?

- **Fast breathing:** If you are caring for a child with CHF, the best time to check their breathing is while they are sleeping. Children naturally breathe faster when awake or crying.

- **Hard breathing:** If your child has hard breathing, you may see muscle pulling or "sucking in" between and below their ribs or the breastbone (called retractions). You may see some widening of their nostrils when they breathe in, or hear a grunting or wheezing sound when they breathe. Some children with CHF may have more trouble breathing when they are lying down.

- **Cough and congestion:** It may be difficult to tell if these symptoms are related to CHF or a cold or sickness. A fever and runny nose are generally symptoms of a cold, not congestive heart failure.

- **Changes in skin color**: Look for a grayish, mottled (lacy or net-like patches) color or paleness.

- **Sweatiness:** Check for cool, clammy skin or sweat on their forehead. This may happen when they're active, feeding, or resting.

- **Decreased amount of urine (pee):** For babies, this may mean they have fewer wet diapers (less than 6-8 a day).

- **Swelling or edema:** Look for puffiness in your child's hands and feet and around their eyes.

- **Changes in activity:** Check for a decrease in activity, an increase in time spent sleeping, or getting tired more easily.

- **Feeding difficulties and poor weight gain:** For babies, this may mean taking longer to finish bottles or eating less than usual.

- **Irritability or restlessness**

- **Fatigue (tiredness)**

How is congestive heart failure treated?

CHF is treated by finding and removing the cause behind the heart not working properly, or by giving your child medications to help their heart work more easily. Some common medications for this include:

- **Digoxin:** This medication slows and strengthens the pumping action of the heart.

- **Diuretics:** These medications help remove extra fluid from the body tissues. This will cause your child to pee more often. Common diuretics include Lasix®, Diuril®, and Aldactone®.

- **Captopril:** This medication enlarges the blood vessels slightly, lowering your child's blood pressure and making it easier for their heart to pump blood to their body.

Other things that you can do to help your child's heart work more easily are:

- Provide quiet areas for your child to rest.
- Avoid extreme hot or cold temperatures.
- Avoid having your child around people who are obviously sick.